

Statement of Support for House Bill No. 6501 “AN ACT CONCERNING THE STREAMLINING OF CERTAIN PROGRAMS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF ENERGY AND ENVIRONMENTAL PROTECTION”

Submitted by Firefighter Rachel Holmes (New Haven, CT)

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As a trained and active Type 2 Wildland Firefighter and practicing urban forester and long-time New Haven resident, I urge you to pass House Bill No. 6501. This proposed legislation would address two significant limitations on the State of Connecticut's ability to provide reciprocal aid to other states and compacts for wildfire suppression.

Scientific evidence shows that throughout the United States, wildfires will continue to increase in duration and intensity as a result of climate change, with forecasts of a potential two to six-fold increase in annual land area burned across the Western US.¹ Unfortunately, the personnel required to control and reduce the damage wildfires cause is not increasing to handle these growing threats. The only solution to this tragic mismatch between wildfire threats and available personnel is to allow the Connecticut Department of Energy and Environmental Protection (CT DEEP) to share personnel resources with other states and Canada via regional compacts. The State's ability to share these resources is especially critical now as the availability of qualified wildland firefighters nationwide has been impacted by COVID-19, a situation which may take years to reverse.

Wildland firefighters are highly-skilled professionals who invest significant time in developing fire suppression and ecology skills and knowledge, and in maintaining superior physical fitness. But knowledge and fitness are not enough. In order to maintain our ability to fight fire safely and effectively, we must regularly participate in fire assignments both within and out of state. Wildland firefighting requires a level of confidence and good judgment that can only be attained when one is placed in real-world firefighting scenarios.

The proposed revisions to Section 23-35 and 23-55 in Chapter 449 Fire Wardens, and the inclusion of liability language required for our participation in eight additional compacts nationwide, will yield additional opportunities for my colleagues and me to continue to hone our skills, increase our knowledge of wildfire, and prepare us for the unpredictable nature of wildfire. These revisions will also ensure that the State of Connecticut is an active participant in protecting our national forest resource on which all Americans depend for clean air, water, and myriad other environmental and social benefits.

In conclusion, this proposed legislation will ensure my ability to return home to my family and loved ones alive and safe, and protect the health and well-being of the American people. Accordingly, HB 6501 truly can be considered a matter of life and death.

¹<https://yaleclimateconnections.org/2019/07/wildfires-and-climate-change-whats-the-connection/>

I thank you for your consideration of my testimony and I thank you for your service to the People of Connecticut.

Sincerely,

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